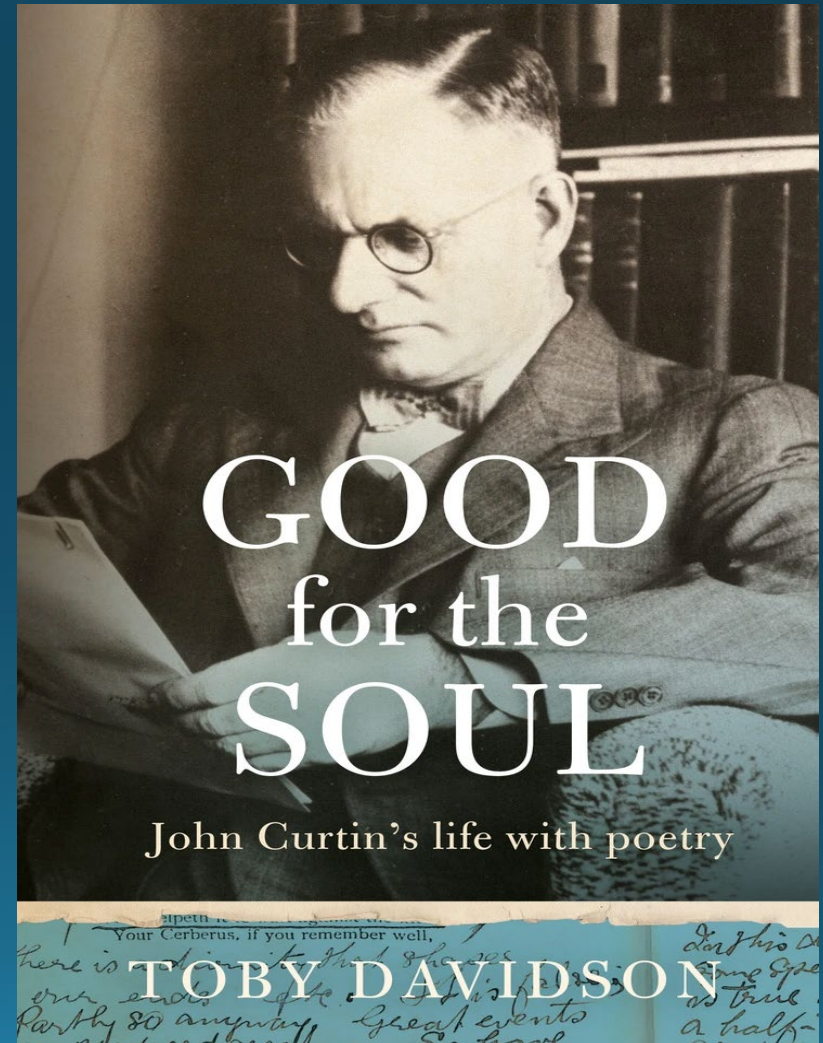
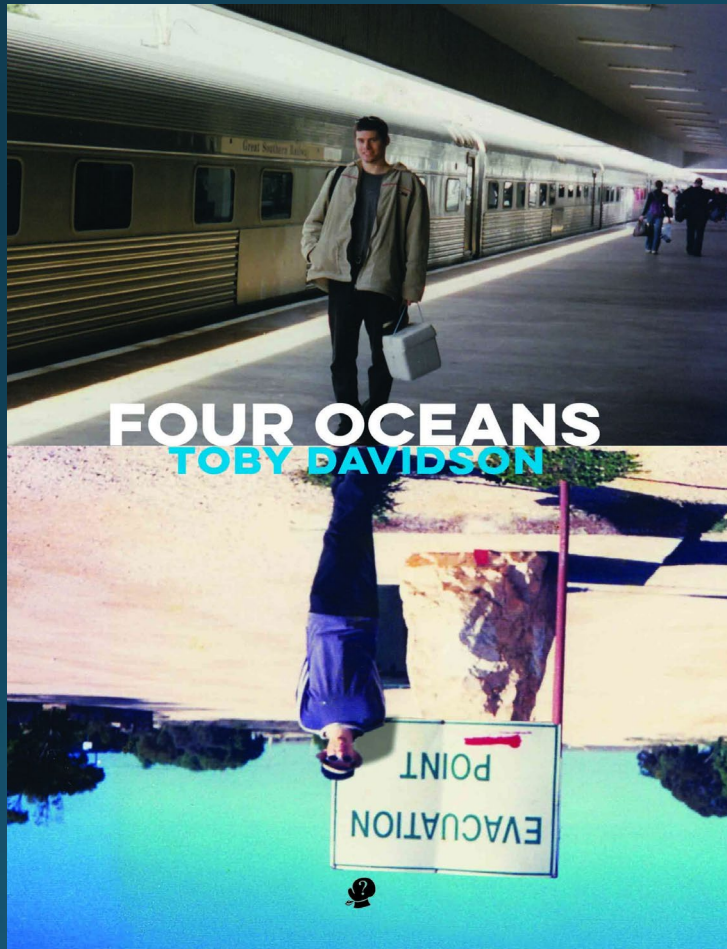
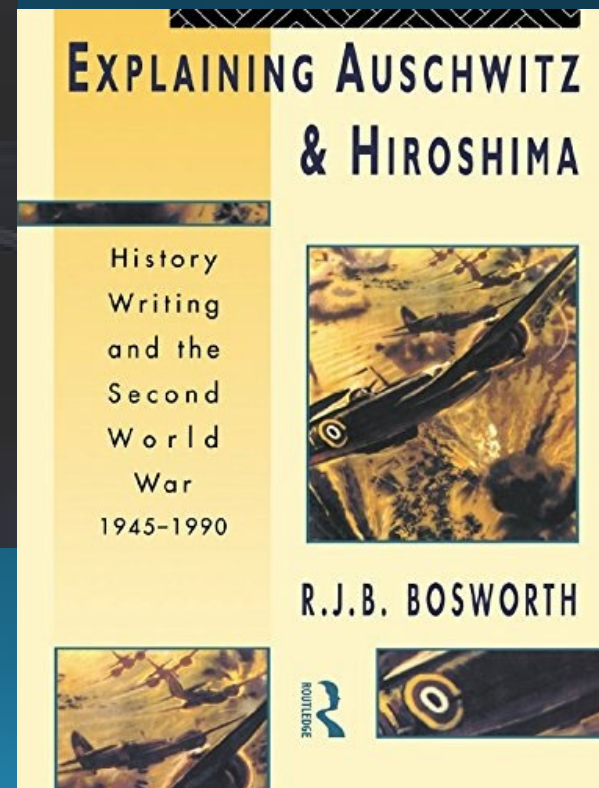
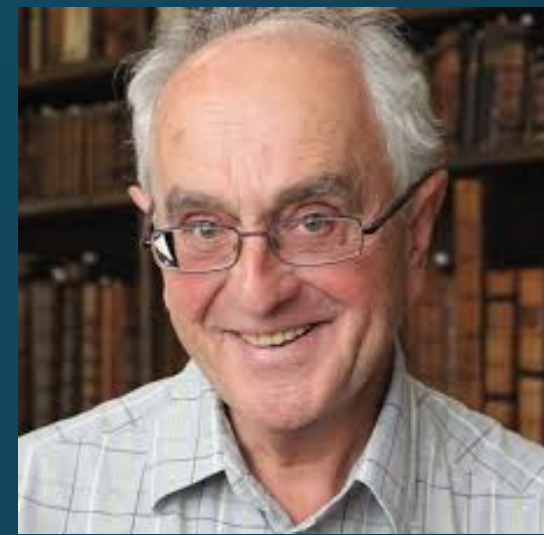
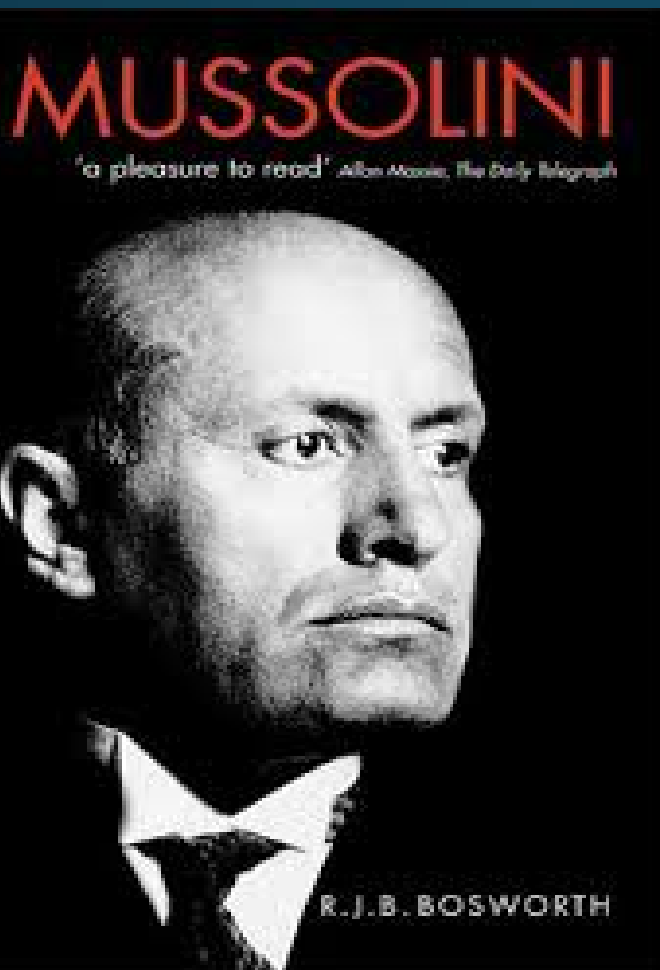


# Poetry as a Biographical Tool in *Good for the Soul: John Curtin's Life with Poetry*

Dr Toby Davidson





# John Curtin (1885-1945)

**1885-1905** Childhood: Country Vic and Melbourne (Brunswick)

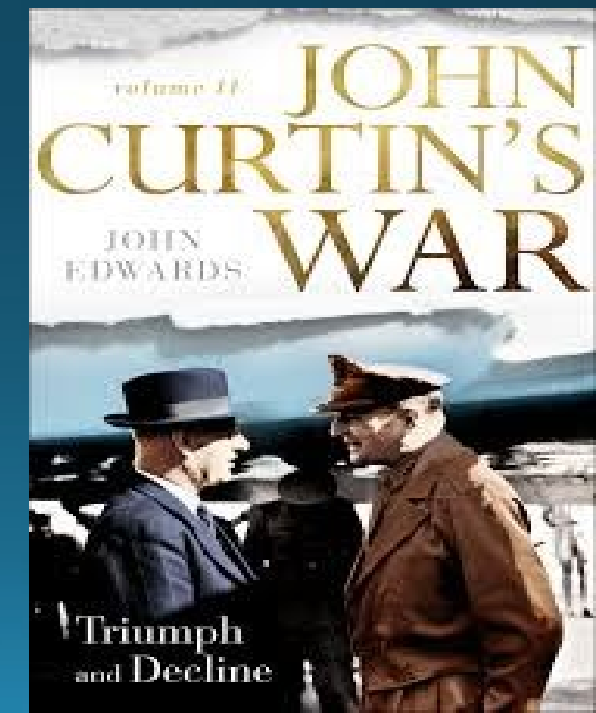
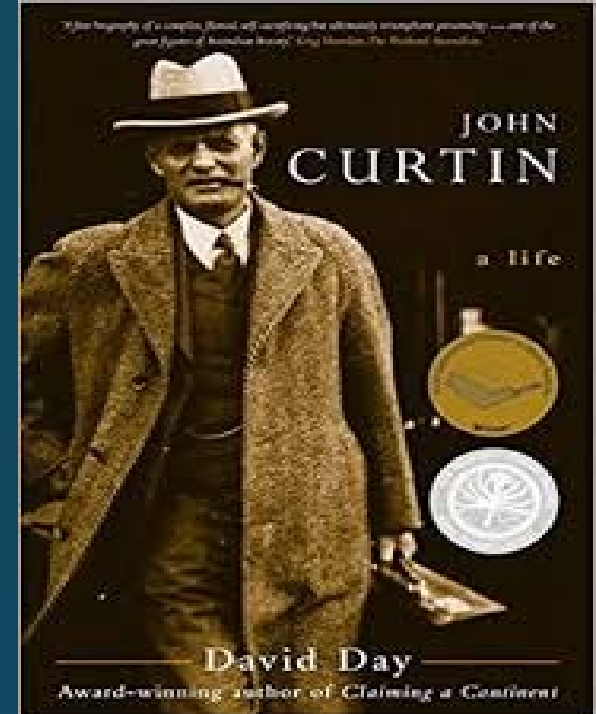
**1906-17** Active as a Melbourne socialist, union newspaper editor

**1917-28** To WA as editor of *Westralian Worker*, marries Elsie Needham, 2 children, lives in Cottesloe

**1928-35** First bitter experiences of Canberra as Labor Member for Fremantle

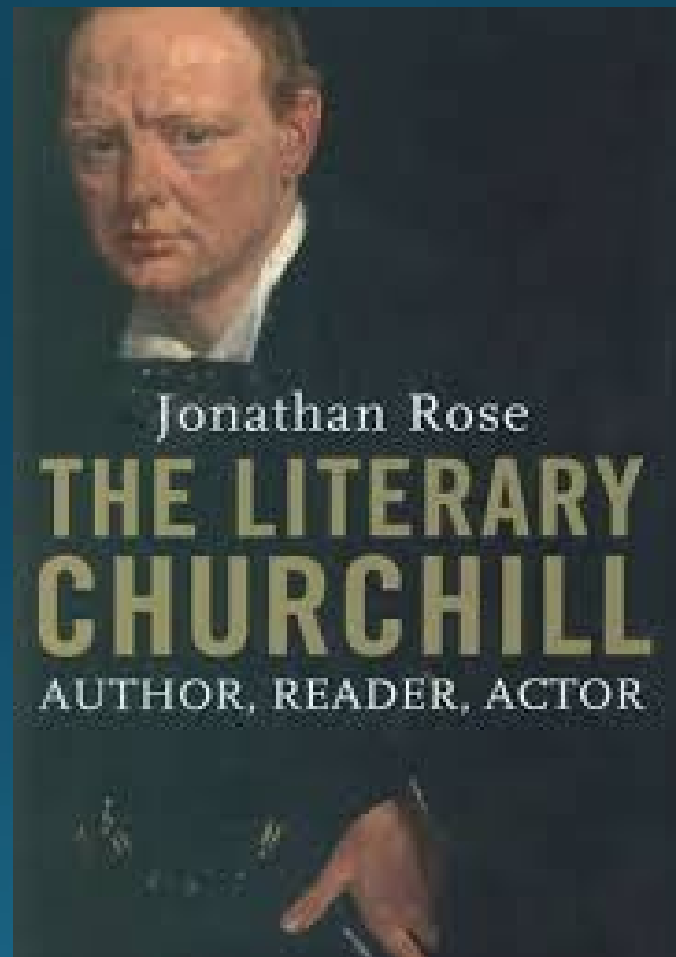
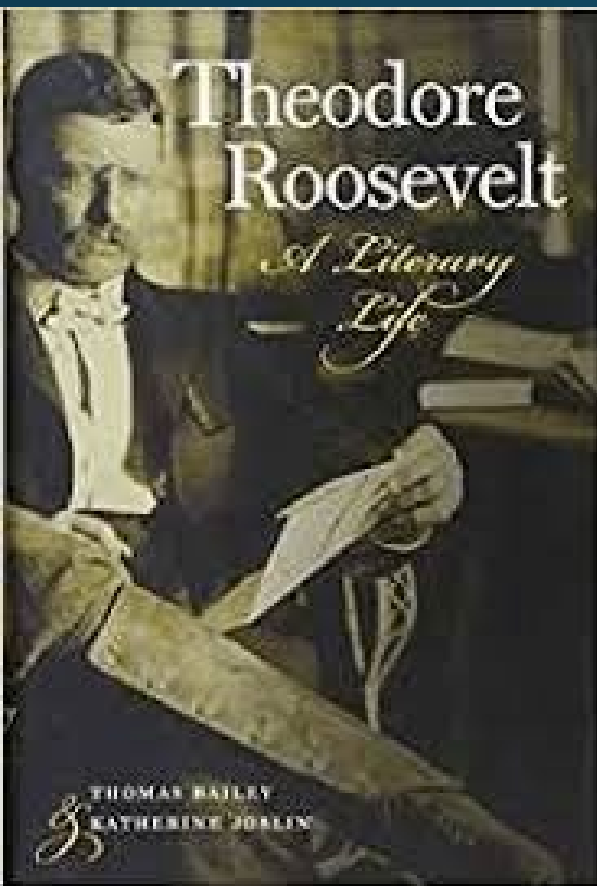
**1935-41** Leader of Labor Opposition, self-styled intellectual leader

**Oct 1941 - July 1945** Prime Minister (Pearl Harbour in Dec 1941, Darwin Bombed / Fall of Singapore in Feb 1942)



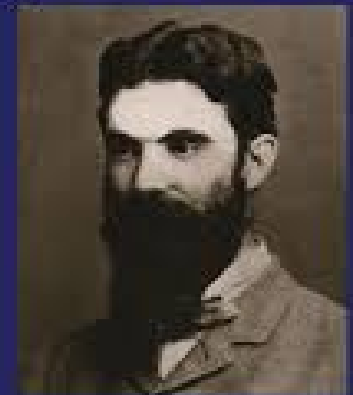


# Literature as a Biographical Tool



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## The Mystic Life of Alfred Deakin



Al Gabay

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# Archive Rat: Classic Mode

2013-14 Visiting Scholar to the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library (JCPML) at Curtin University, Perth

Physically scoured poetry volumes, anthologies and criticism in the Curtin family library (pic below) for inscriptions, marginalia

State Library NSW: Norman Lindsay's 1899 comic *The Rambler*, not digitised; letters of Dame Mary Gilmore

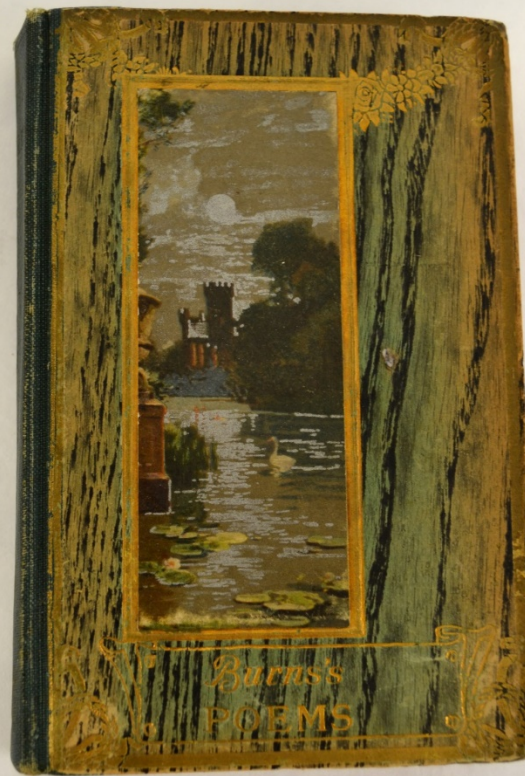
NLA, Canberra: Physical Curtin archives



To dear Jack,  
Wishing you  
many happy returns  
of the 8<sup>th</sup>  
With love from  
Gat —

8<sup>th</sup> January 1910.

"Books we know,  
are a substantial world  
both pure and good;  
Round these, with tendrils  
strong as flesh and blood,  
Our pastime and our  
happiness will grow."  
— Wordsworth





## CANTO II.

DAY was departing, and the embrownd air  
 Released the animals that are on earth  
 From their fatigues ; and I the only one *the factory whistle does it now.*  
 Made myself ready to sustain the war,  
 Both of the way and likewise of the woe,  
 Which memory shall retrace, that erreth not.  
 O Muses, O high genius, now assist me !  
 O memory, that didst write down what I saw,  
 Here thy nobility shall be manifest !  
 And I began : " Poet, who guidest me,  
 5      Regard my manhood, if it be sufficient,  
 10      Ere to the arduous pass thou dost confide me.  
 Thou sayest, that of Sylvius the parent,  
 While yet corruptible, unto the world  
 Immortal went, and was there bodily.  
 15      But if the adversary of all evil  
 Was courteous, thinking of the high effect  
 That issue would from him, and who, and what,  
 To men of intellect unmeet it seems not ;  
 20      For he was of great Rome, and of her empire  
 In the empyreal heaven as father chosen ;  
 The which and what, wishing to speak the truth,  
 Were stablished as the holy place, wherein  
 Sits the successor of the greatest Peter.  
 25      Upon this journey, whence thou givest him vaunt,  
 Things did he hear, which the occasion were

INFERNO II.

Both of his victory and the papal mantle.  
 Thither went afterwards the Chosen Vessel,  
 To bring back comfort thence unto that Faith,  
 Which of salvation's way is the beginning.  
 But I, why thither come, or who concedes it ?  
 I not Æneas am, I am not Paul,  
 Nor I, nor others, think me worthy of it.  
 Therefore, if I resign myself to come,  
 I fear the coming may be ill advised ;  
 Thou'rt wise and knowest better than I speak."  
 And as he is, who unwillis what he willed,  
 And by new thoughts doth his intention change,  
 So that from his design he quite withdraws,  
 Such I became, upon that dark hillside,  
 Because, in thinking, I consumed the emprise,  
 Which was so very prompt in the beginning.  
 " If I have well thy language understood,"  
 Replied that shade of the Magnanimous,  
 " Thy soul attainted is with cowardice,  
 Which many times a man encumbers so,  
 It turns him back from honoured enterprise,  
 As false sight doth a beast, when he is shy.  
 That thou mayst free thee from this apprehension,  
 I'll tell thee why I came, and what I heard  
 At the first moment when I grieved for thee.  
 Among those was I who are in suspense,  
 And a fair, saintly Lady called to me  
 In such wise, I besought her to command me.  
 Her eyes were shining brighter than the Star ;  
 And she began to say, gentle and low,  
 With voice angelical, in her own language :  
 ' O spirit courteous of Mantua,  
 Of whom the fame still in the world endures,  
 And shall endure, long-lasting as the world ;  
 A friend of mine, and not the friend of fortune



That which is willed ; and ask no further question,"  
 Thereat were quieted the fleecy cheeks  
 Of him the ferryman of the livid fen,  
 Who round about his eyes had wheels of flame.  
 But all those souls who weary were and naked 100  
 Their colour changed and gnashed their teeth together,  
 As soon as they had heard those cruel words.  
 God they blasphemed and their progenitors,  
 The human race, the place, the time, the seed  
 Of their engendering and of their birth !  
 Thereafter altogether they withdrew, 105  
 Bitterly weeping, to the accursed shore,  
 Which waiteth every man who fears not God.  
 Charon the demon, with the eyes of glede,  
 Beckoning to them, collects them all together, 110  
 Beats with his oar whoever lags behind.  
 As in the autumn time the leaves fall off,  
 First one and then another, till the branch  
 Unto the earth surrenders all its spoils ;  
 In similar wise the evil seed of Adam 115  
 Throw themselves from that margin one by one,  
 At signals, as a bird unto its lure.  
 So they depart across the dusky wave,  
 And ere upon the other side they land,  
 Again on this side a new troop assembles. 120  
 "My son," the courteous Master said to me,  
 "All those who perish in the wrath of God  
 Here meet together out of every land ;  
 And ready are they to pass o'er the river,  
 Because celestial Justice spurs them on,  
So that their fear is turned into desire. ) - 125  
 This way there never passeth a good soul ;  
 And hence if Charon doth complain of thee,  
 Well mayst thou know now what his speech imports."  
 This being finished, all the dusk champaign 130

*A faith is first feared and then  
 embraced.  
 So day the world is afraid of Socialism  
 To-morrow it will desire it*

Trembled so violently, that of that terror  
 The recollection bathes me still with sweat.  
 The land of tears gave forth a blast of wind,  
 And fulminated a vermillion light,  
 Which overmastered in me every sense, 135  
 And as a man whom sleep doth seize I fell.





Who chased the Trojans from the Strophades,  
With sad announcement of impending doom ;  
Broad wings have they, and necks and faces human,  
And feet with claws, and their great bellies fledged ;  
They make laments upon the wondrous trees. 15  
And the good Master : " Ere thou enter farther,  
Know that thou art within the second round,"  
Thus he began to say, " and shalt be, till  
Thou comest upon the horrible sand-waste ;

Therefore look well around, and thou shalt see 20  
Things that will credence give unto my speech."  
I heard on all sides lamentations uttered,  
And person none beheld I who might make them,

Whence, utterly bewildered, I stood still.  
I think he thought that I perhaps might think  
So many voices issued through those trunks 25

*This demonstrates the value of constructive  
argument as against empty platitudes.  
"Poverty is everywhere" is an unconvincing  
phrase. "Here is Poverty Look at"  
it these are the actual conditions  
is much better*



J. Carter

"Who would know the truth  
and point the way"

Robert

1912

To my dear friend  
Elsie Hedham

May 25 1912

"It is for us to bring the  
flowers of truth so  
that the crossing-sweepers  
may behold their beauty  
and learn to love them."

"Let knowledge grow from more  
to more  
And more of reverence in us  
dwell  
That heart and mind accord-  
ing well  
may make one music as  
before"

# Digital Archive Rat

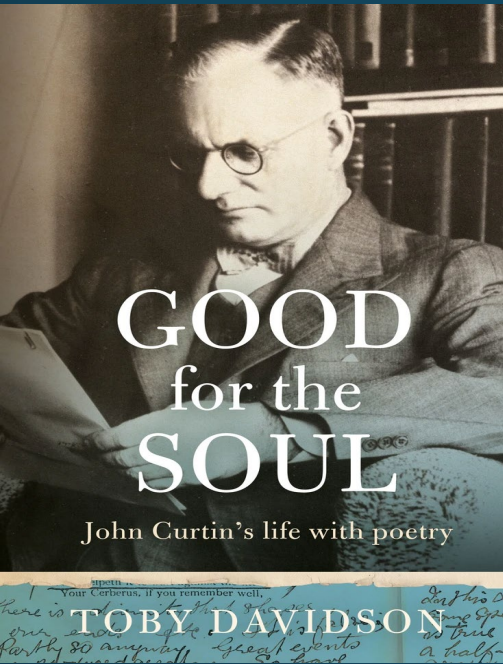
- National Archives, NLA Trove database (for newspapers) and Historic Hansard. Word-search functionality, allowing searches by lines and names of Curtin's most admired poets.
- Almost exclusively the pre-modernist Western canon: Dante, Milton (his declared favourite), Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Swinburne, Whitman, James Russell Lowell and Ella Wheeler Wilcox, plus Australians Dame Mary Gilmore and Bernard O'Dowd -- he knew both personally.
- JCPML database, resources such as Curtin timeline *Diary of a Labor Man*. JCPML now has all Curtin's notes to Dante's *Inferno* available in pdf. Zoom Q&A with John Curtin High School, Freo



# Acknowledgements

## Introduction

1. ‘Young Curtin stood by wide-eyed as the tumult rose’
2. The Victorian Socialist Party Reading List
3. Dante as Political Mentor
4. ‘The indispensable woman & the very delightful wine’
5. The People’s Armament goes to War
6. ‘More like a uni. professor than a leftist politician’
7. Our Bookshelf and the Case of ‘Vigilant’
8. Verses, Curses and Canberra



9. An Intellectual Labor Leader

10. 'Or can it be the dawn?': Poland to Pearl Harbor

11. PM Curtin's Life with Poetry, 1942–43

12. PM Curtin's Life with Poetry, 1944–45

13. The Curtins and Dame Mary Gilmore

14. Conclusion: 'Australia does not consist of the buildings around us'

Appendix 1: John Curtin's Light Verse

Appendix 2: Poetry Titles in the Curtin Family Library

General Index

Index of Poets

# 12 October 1941: *Sunday Telegraph*

At the age of 56 John Curtin becomes Australia's third wartime Prime Minister, Labor's eighth Prime Minister, and the first Prime Minister from a Western Australian electorate.

This ex-journalist who led the Opposition for six years is known to the public as a brilliant orator and debater with the best command of vocabulary of any Australian politician.

To his family and close friends he is also the man who loves to read poetry – especially **Milton** – and confesses to being an “alleged” bridge-player and bowler. At his home in Cottesloe (W.A.) John Curtin has a library of more than 2000 books.

“For 20 years it has been my habit on Sunday nights to devote at least an hour to reading poetry...I read them all, from Chaucer on – but my favourite is **Milton**. Yet I don't suppose many people read him today. Every man should read poetry – for the good of his soul.”

# Curtin 'Swinburne as Revolutionist', *Westralian Worker*, 1918

Swinburne's poetry is the poetry of Revolution. The song of Swinburne, no less than that of [Percy] Shelley, breathes the inspiration of the democratic idea.

They stand together upon a pinnacle that towers above the great brotherhood, the one for the dazzling splendour of his imagery, the other for the rich dulcet tones, the exquisite technique of his music. And widely as their symphonies differ, intrinsically it is the same word made flesh.

[Swinburne] hears eternally ... **'The cry of the world's heart's wrong'** ['Ode to Mazzini']



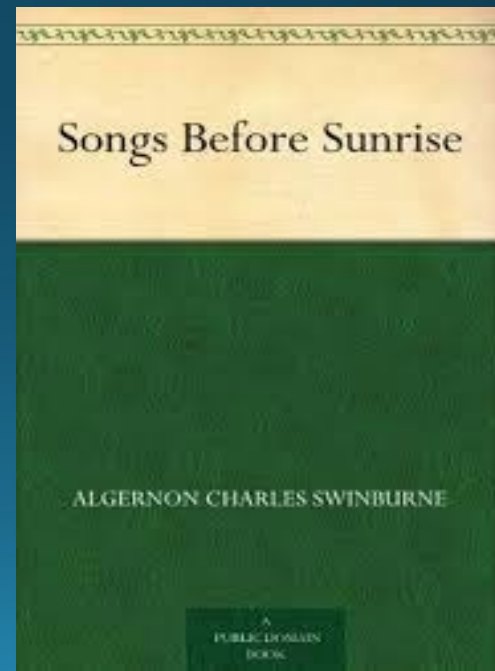
# 8 Dec 1941: Algernon Swinburne

Curtin broadcast ‘Men and women of Australia, we are at war with Japan’, concluding with Swinburne’s 1871 poem ‘The Eve of Revolution’:

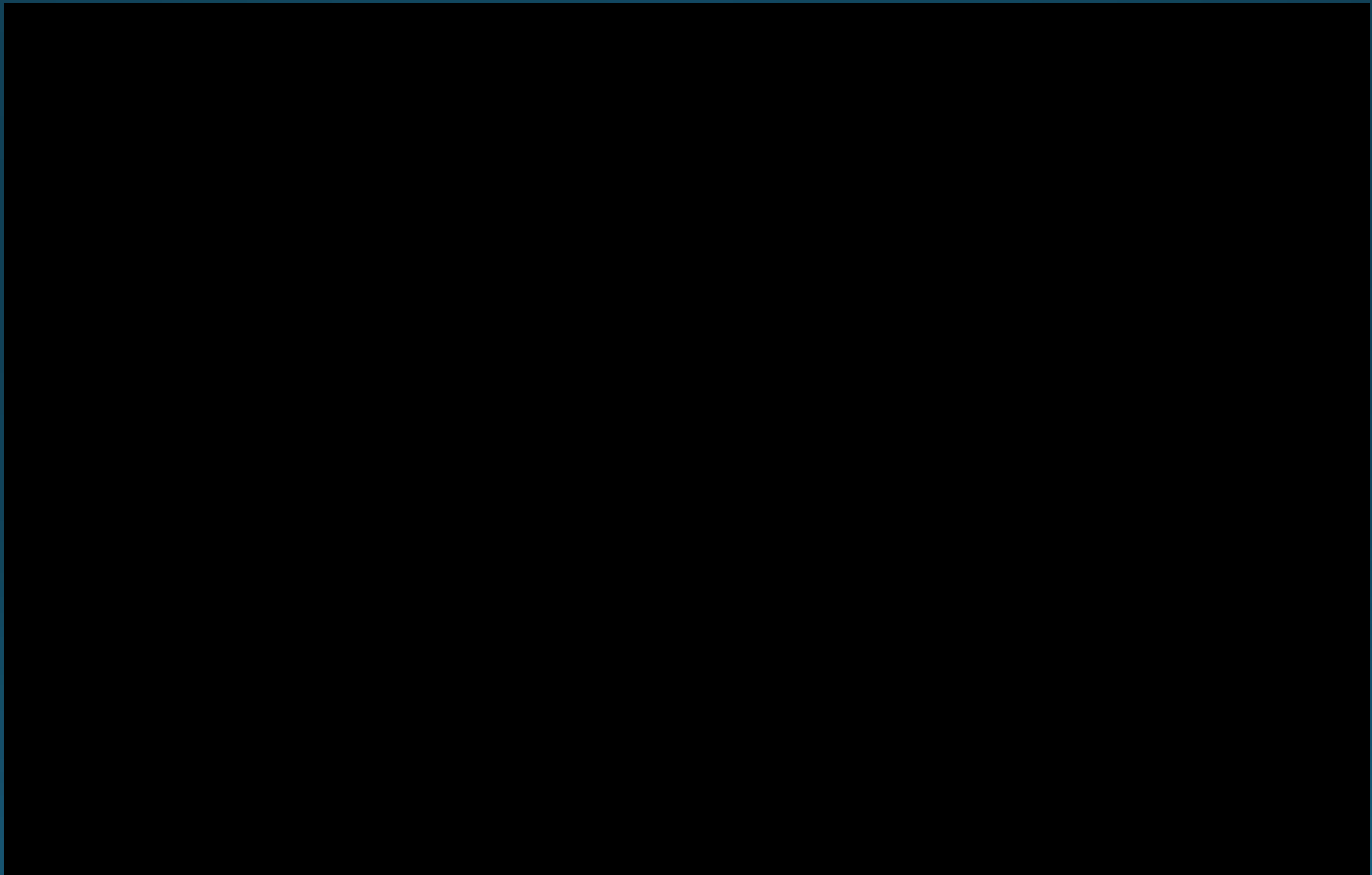
**‘This is our darkest hour. Let that be fully realized ... We shall hold this country, and keep it as a citadel for the British-speaking race, and as a place where civilization will persist.**

**Men and women of Australia. It is my to sound a tocsin [alarm]! I proclaim a call unto you. I do it in the words of Swinburne:**

**“Come forth, be born and live,  
Thou that hast help to give  
And light to make man’s day of manhood fair:  
With flight outflying the sphered sun,  
Hasten thine hour  
And halt not til thy work be done.” ’**



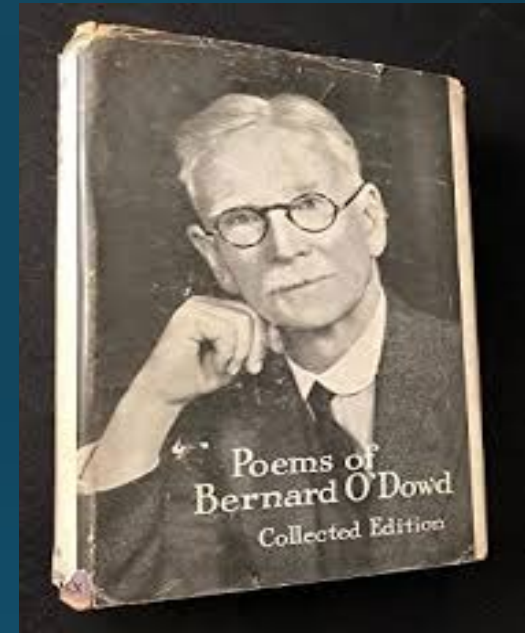
# Conclusion from 13:05



# Poetry as Collective/National Biography (Melbourne *Herald*, 9 Dec 1941)

A quotation from Swinburne by the Prime Minister (Mr Curtin) in his national broadcast last night has caused great interest among his friends. Mr Curtin wrote the quotation from memory a few moments before his broadcast began, because he thought it peculiarly appropriate as an invocation to the Australian people. Apart from his stirring appeal, the quotation has remarkable application to modern aerial warfare.

# 26 Dec 1941: Bernard O'Dowd





# O'Dowd 'Dawnward?' 1903

That reddish veil which o'er the face  
    Of night-hag East is drawn ....  
Flames new disaster for the race?  
    Or can it be the dawn?

Those mutterings horizonward ...  
    What destinies are there?  
Do organed Hopes triumphant chord  
    or thunders road "Despair"?

What gifts are those the clouds release  
    As far ahead they scud?  
Are they genial rains of Peace,  
    Or deluges of blood?

# Curtin 'The Task Ahead', 27 Dec 1941

"That reddish veil which o'er the face  
Of night-hag East is drawn ....  
Flames new disaster for the race?  
Or can it be the dawn?"

So wrote Bernard O'Dowd. I see 1942 as a year in which we shall know the answer. I would, however, that we provide the answer ... the reshaping, in fact the revolutionising, of the Australian way of life until a war footing is attained quickly, efficiently and without question ...

We refuse to accept the dictum that the Pacific struggle must be treated as a subordinate segment of the general conflict... **Without inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom ...**

We shall exert all our energies towards the shaping of a plan, with the United States as its keystone, which will give our country some confidence of being able to hold out ... Australia is at stake in this war.